

Exclusive interview with Art Basel director Sam Keller



“Art Basel is the world’s most important fair... and it will continue to be after I’ve left”

Art Basel director Samuel Keller recently announced that he will become head of the Beyeler Foundation in 2008. His departure from Art Basel, which he has directed since 2000, has become a widely discussed topic in the art world. In an exclusive interview with The Art Newspaper, Keller discusses his decision, the transition and Art Basel’s future.

TAN: Why are you leaving?

SK: There are opportunities in life to which you can’t say no. Also, I care deeply about Art Basel and realised this would be the best possible way to leave my job—I am staying in the same city, and have almost two years to find a successor and properly introduce him or her to the art world.

In terms of my successor, the first step is not to look at the person, but rather to look at the long-term structure. Then we’ll look internationally; this position is too important to limit the search to Swiss passport holders only.

TAN: Would you consider having two directors, one for Art Basel and one for Art Basel/Miami Beach?

SK: I don’t want to speculate, but different models are possible. Obviously, it doesn’t have to be the same person, but that’s something to discuss with the fair organisers.

TAN: For years you’ve been an icon of the art world’s internationalisation. Why stay in Basel?

SK: It’s a great place for art, and

being here allows me to be a hometown person while working internationally—look at the example of architects Herzog & de Meuron. Also, I’m from the Riehen area, where the Beyeler Foundation is located. As a child I used to run around in the park that surrounds that museum. So it’s an emotional thing, too.

But the main reason for the decision was Beyeler, because the Beyelers are among those most responsible for Basel being an art city, which inspired people like me, with no family art background. Beyeler founded the fair and he recommended me as the director. I wouldn’t be where I am without him, nor would the fair.

TAN: Was directing a museum always an ambition for you?

SK: I never had a career plan, I only knew that I wanted a role that brought me closer to art. One of the few problems with my current job is that the art is only in our halls twice a year. So I envy gallerists their day-to-day relationship with art and admired the way someone like Beyeler takes a painting in his hands and holds it in his lap like a child and praises it.

TAN: Two years is a long time to be on the way out.

SK: I wanted to leave Art Basel in the right way, which means realising all the ideas in the pipeline. In America it’s normal for people to announce their departure and leave immediately. In Switzerland we think long-

term. Also, art fairs work in year-long cycles. Continuity is very important and this time frame makes it possible.

TAN: There’s a real fear in the art world that the fair will suffer once you’re gone.

SK: Art Basel is built upon a wide organisation. It was the world’s most important fair before I came, it is now, and it will continue to be after I’ve left. I’m totally confident that the services and organisational skills that make Basel outstanding are in good hands. And I’m not disappearing, since I will stay involved in a consulting role as chairman of Art Basel, putting my experience and network to work for the fair, just as Beyeler has.

TAN: People don’t associate the Beyeler Foundation with the type of contemporary work that became more prominent during your directorship of the fair.

SK: I’ll only discuss the future of the Beyeler Foundation once I’m there, but Ernst Beyeler asked me to take care of his foundation, not to flip it upside down and change everything. Also, my interest in art has always been very broad, not limited by dates. For me, modern and contemporary are parts of the same body; the two belong together. That’s been my approach personally and with Art Basel—and I don’t see why that would change.

Marc Spiegler